



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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22 ARRESTED, APPROXIMATELY 200 PEOPLE TO BE CHARGED IN  
3-YEAR UNDERCOVER INVESTIGATION OF WATERFOWL POACHING

A 3-year Federal undercover investigation of commercial hunting operations in Texas will result in criminal charges against approximately 200 people for violations of waterfowl hunting regulations, Frank Dunkle, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

"During this investigation, Service agents reported flagrant violations of the laws intended to protect waterfowl," Dunkle said. "There is no place in the hunting community for operations that permit or encourage violations. Law-abiding waterfowlers are outraged by these unethical and unsporting practices that betray total lack of concern for the status of waterfowl populations."

Secretary of the Interior Don Hodel praised the investigators, saying, "We have sent a clear message that we will not tolerate violations of waterfowl hunting laws. I am delighted by the Service's hard work and great success in this investigation."

Assistant Attorney General Roger J. Marzulla of the Justice Department's Land and Natural Resources Division, which helped to coordinate planning and implementation of the undercover operation, said the case represented another step by the Federal government to protect wildlife resources, particularly waterfowl.

"This undercover investigation revealed widespread, callous disregard for the laws protecting migratory waterfowl. Those who illegally kill geese and ducks cheat not only the law, but present and future generations. Extraordinary law enforcement techniques, such as this investigation, provide the only effective means of obtaining a true picture of the extent of commercialized wildlife violations," Marzulla said.

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Twenty-two people--all hunting guides or owners of the hunting operations--were to be arrested this morning in a coordinated effort by more than 100 Fish and Wildlife Service agents.

Twenty-one of the arrests were to occur in Texas and one in Iowa. Indictments and informations have been issued against 52 others, and approximately 135 people will be issued notices in Alabama, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, Oklahoma, and Texas for violations that occurred in Texas. The charges include felony and misdemeanor violations of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Lacey Act.

The investigation, part of a continuing Federal crackdown on waterfowl poaching, began during the 1985-86 waterfowl hunting season and concluded this fall. Fish and Wildlife Service undercover agents booked hunts with suspect guides and owners of commercial hunting businesses charging from \$65 to \$500 per day for hunting on leased marshes and rice fields, as well as public lands, along the Texas coast. The investigation focused on owners and guides who allegedly were killing waterfowl illegally and aiding and openly encouraging paying clients to do the same. Violations by hunters paying to use the areas also were recorded by agents.

Forty-one commercial hunting businesses were investigated, and agents documented more than 1,300 violations. Violations allegedly occurred on 92 percent of the hunts observed by agents. Charges brought include shooting more than the legal limit; "rallying," or stirring up waterfowl with a motorboat or airboat to drive them toward hunters; use of lead shot in steel shot zones; wanton waste (failure to retrieve birds shot); use of recorded, amplified calls; taking birds during closed seasons; taking over bait; shooting before or after legal shooting hours; sales of migratory birds; and tagging and record-keeping violations, often including tagging birds as belonging to someone who had not hunted that day, or falsifying dates when the birds were shot.

The alleged violations involved snow and blue geese as well as large numbers of pintails, teal, redhead, and many other species of ducks. In several instances, agents said raptors, herons, ibises, and other migratory non-game birds were illegally killed or sold to undercover agents.

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Misdemeanor violations of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act can carry penalties of 6 months in prison and fines of \$5,000 for individuals and \$10,000 for organizations. Penalties for felony violations are 2 years in prison and fines of up to \$250,000 for individuals and \$500,000 for organizations.

Misdemeanor violations of the Lacey Act can carry penalties of 1 year in prison and fines of \$100,000 for individuals and \$200,000 for organizations. Felony violations may result in 5 years in prison and fines of up to \$250,000 for individuals and \$500,000 for organizations.

The subjects are charged in the Eastern (Beaumont Division), Southern (Houston, Galveston, Corpus Christi, and Victoria Divisions), and Northern (Amarillo Division) Districts of Texas. Prosecutions will be handled by the respective U.S. Attorneys for those Districts and the Wildlife and Marine Resources Section, Lands and Resources Division, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

"Duck numbers already are near record lows because of the drought and continued destruction of their natural habitat," Dunkle said. "They cannot long withstand additional losses from illegal harvest. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will not tolerate violations of the waterfowl hunting regulations."

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